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# WPA Project Ten Years Later

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## WPA Project Ten Years Later

Back in the depression days of the 1930's nearly everybody was getting some kind of federal aid — even artists. The WPA federal art project was devised particularly to aid writers and painters, though other arts such as drama were also included. Iowa was soon a part of this program. A State director was appointed, and WPA centers were set up at such cities as Des Moines, Mason City, Ottumwa, and Sioux City. None of these, however, survived the withdrawal of federal funds except Sioux City.

There are several reasons for the healthy state of the Sioux City Center. First of all it was a community project which touched more than just a few artists or art patrons. This seems to have been true from the very beginning, but it needs some explanation.

There was interest in art at Sioux City even before WPA days. Men such as E. E. Lewis, attorney and realtor, had entertained Lorado Taft and the early settler, George Kingsnorth, had a daughter who was interested in painting. Alice Kingsnorth Lawler promoted art for over half a century in the pioneer river town. It was in a small public art gallery which she founded in the



main library building that Roy Langley, later Director of the Center, first taught his children's art classes, the nucleus for the present art center.

When WPA funds were later available for federal art centers in such midwest cities as Sioux City, the Junior League which had provided scholarships in art classes, along with some artists and other interested people formed a Sioux City Art Association with a small subscription assessment and petitioned federal assistance for a WPA project. The new organization represented a reorganization of the former Sioux City Society of Fine Arts which Mrs. Lawler had founded.

The problem of finding a building was solved by the Williges brothers, a local retail and wholesale fur company. The Williges sons gave, in honor of their father, August Williges, some spacious and fireproof rooms for the Art Center in the basement of their centrally-located, downtown building. The space was donated rent-free and that policy has been continued ever since.

Everybody then became interested in the new Center. The two newspapers supported it enthusiastically. One hundred and fifty people — businessmen, Junior Leaguers, a teacher-supervisor of the public schools, and numerous volunteer workers all donated spare time and energy to helping the project get underway. Electricians and carpenters on WPA payrolls donated additional



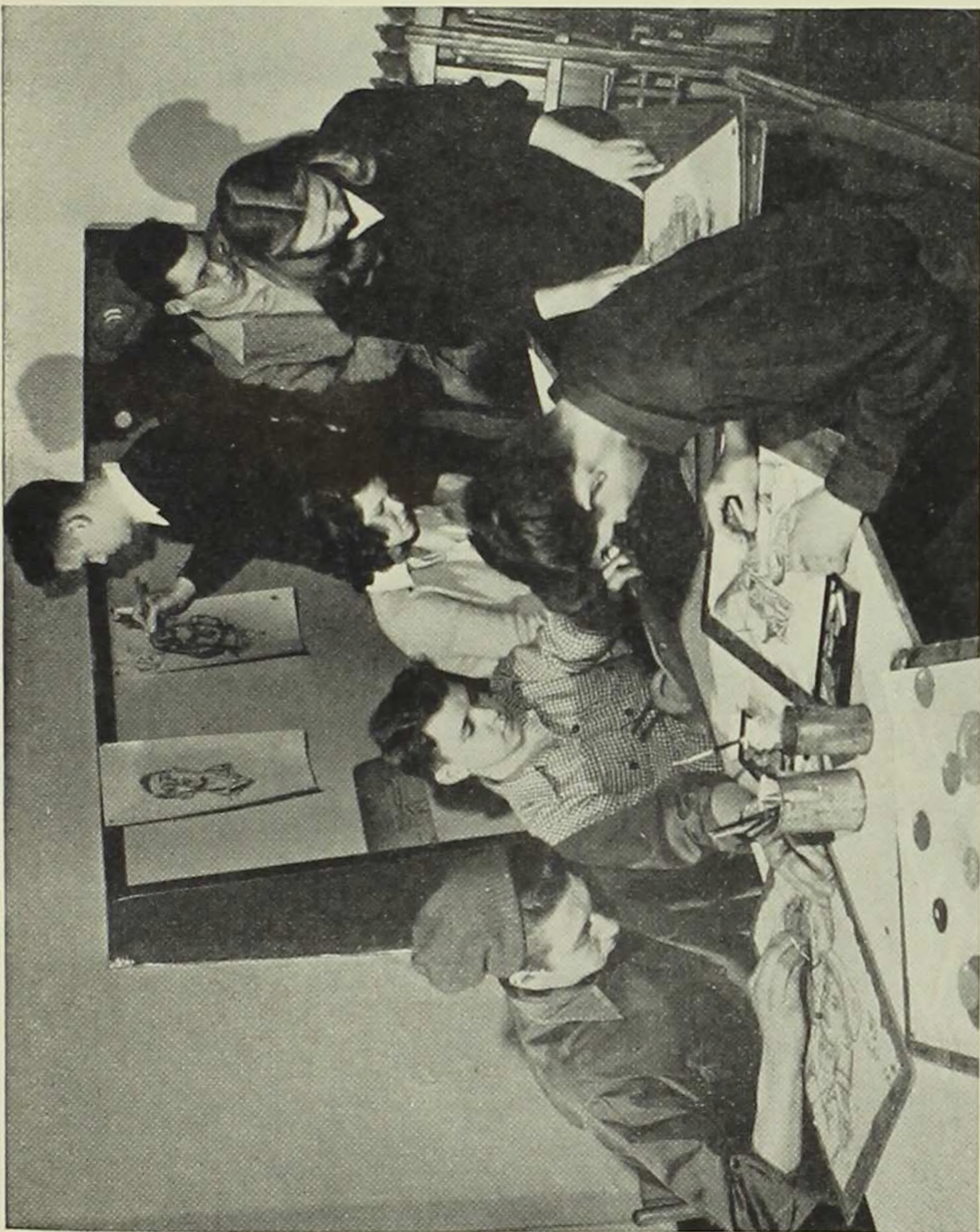


PHOTO BY DAVENPORT DEMOCRAT AND LEADER  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AT DAVENPORT MUNICIPAL GALLERY





PHOTO BY SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

CHILDREN WAITING TO REGISTER AT SIOUX CITY ART CENTER



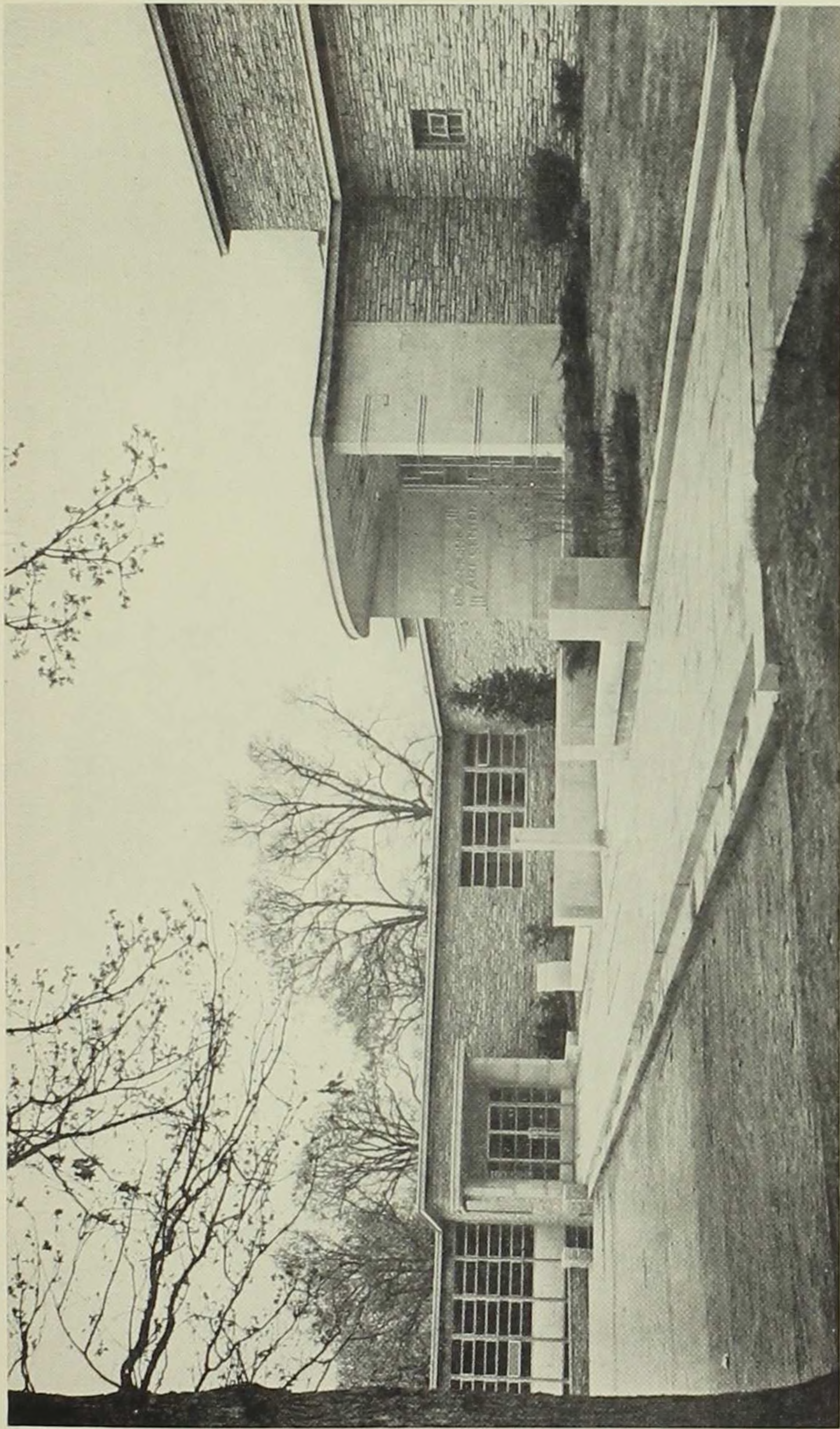


PHOTO BY MARION PEASE

DES MOINES ART CENTER



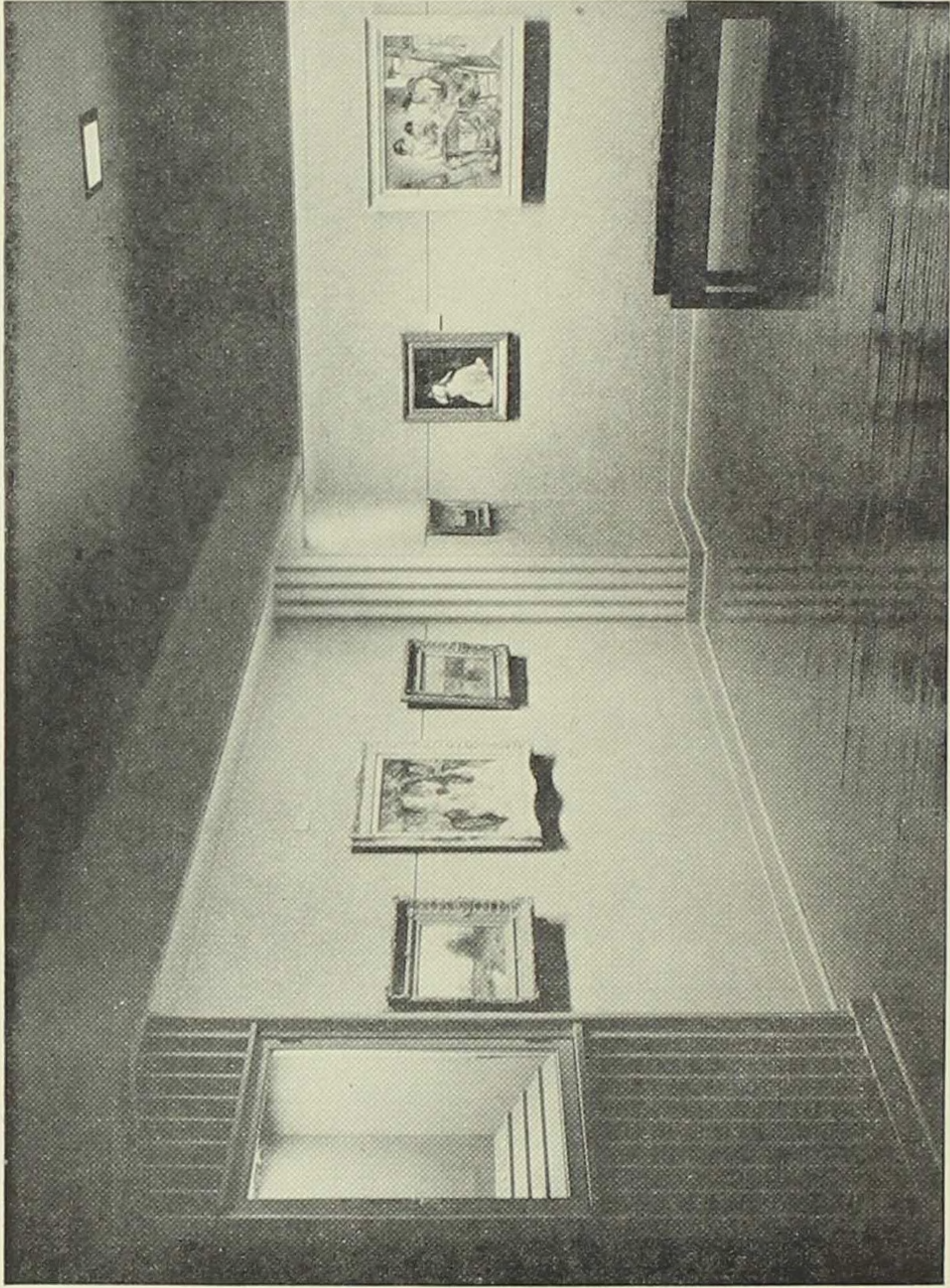


PHOTO BY DAVENPORT DAILY TIMES

DAVENPORT MUNICIPAL GALLERY



hours amounting to two days of free labor. Seventeen members of the Master Plumbers and Steamfitters Union, Local 18, took a Saturday afternoon off and donated their labor to install needed equipment throughout the galleries, classrooms, carpenter shop, weaving room, and poster shop. Young people from the National Youth Administration volunteered help also, and the manual training classes in the public schools helped build easels and equipment.

It was inevitable with so many helping, that interest in the new Center should stay at fever pitch. More than 2,000 came to the opening on February 20, 1938: 300 stopped to register for classes. The State Director of the WPA art project, Francis Robert White, was present along with distinguished visitors from outside the State. Everyone who had helped was consequently interested in the program and success of the new Center. Roy Langley who had taught art to the public library classes became one of the first instructors of the Center, and more recently has served as Director, until he was replaced in the summer of 1948 by Mr. Carl F. Riter, the present Director. The teaching staff of the Center has varied from one to twelve in more prosperous times.

WPA funds have long since been withdrawn and the Center is now supported from three sources. Part of the money comes from the city



with a one-sixteenth mill levy in city taxes. From this tax about \$4,500 is received annually. Tuition fees yield \$800 a year and the rest is made up from membership fees. A membership in the Sioux City Art Center Association has annual dues of \$5 for an associate, \$10 for an active patron, \$25 or over for a patron, and \$100 for the institutional patron. Thus the Sioux City Center is supported partly by taxes, partly by membership dues and partly by gifts from art patrons. Its budget is therefore not so secure as the Davenport Municipal Gallery, but the fact that it has tax funds at all for its use is witness to the interest which was built up in the city at large at the initial organization.

How much is the Center used? During the season, 1948-1949, it had 125 children between the ages of 9 and 12 enrolled in Saturday morning classes with 100 more on the waiting list because of lack of equipment and instructors. The children pay part of the cost of their materials, but the Center furnishes some materials and the instruction. Thus the expense to the child is low enough to enable all who are interested to apply. The average attendance at a Saturday class is 85 which precludes much individual instruction. Emphasis is put on good drawing, the use of color, and composition in the initial instruction which includes drawing and painting in various media.



Outdoor classes are held when the weather is favorable and a variety of experience and subject matter is thus made possible to the children. They respond to it enthusiastically, releasing their imaginations in creative work that offers a very wholesome way to spend an otherwise idle Saturday morning.

There are ten other classes offered at the Center besides a class for teen-age young people, for which regular tuition is charged. In addition about 90 adults take work in life drawing, beginning and advanced painting, water color, silk screen, lithography, ceramics, color and design, photography, and crafts. All kinds of people with all kinds of other interests attend these classes. Stenographers, housewives, businessmen, farmers, and farmers' wives mingle in the classes, which for some are an escape from the typewriter, for others a sedative to jangling nerves, and for all a widening of their cultural horizon.

Unexpected talent has frequently appeared in these Art Center classes. Two housewives, Mrs. Alphid Olson and Mrs. Winifred Story, who never before had had a brush in their hands, began to place repeatedly in the six state competitive shows at the Joslyn Memorial Gallery in Omaha. A high school girl, Mary Editha Webster, whose entire training had been at the Sioux City Art Center, placed fourth in a national com-



petition with 700,000 entries conducted by the *American Magazine* youth forum. During World War II, soldiers from the flying fortress base at Sioux City painted at the Center and sometimes won prizes in the shows.

To encourage local talent the Art Center Association has recently established an annual scholarship providing for free instruction in a minimum of three classes per week. The Association named this award the "Williges Scholarship" in honor of the family which has given the Center its building space since 1938.

The Center has become the focus of other creative activities in Sioux City. Musicales are held there frequently. A creative writers' guild and a Camera Club also hold meetings there, and other cultural groups such as the Garden Club and the Bird Club make use of its facilities. Art enthusiasts hold a monthly dinner meeting at the Center at which a program related to the arts is presented.

Moreover the entire city has grown art-conscious in the last ten years. Sioux City homes show Iowa landscapes and an occasional portrait. Murals have appeared in clubs and recreation rooms. Two women's organizations have instituted art shows at the Center to encourage local artists. The art department of the Woman's Club has, for example, inaugurated an all-Iowa water color show with prizes and a traveling exhibit of



the 40 best pictures entered. Judging for this show is done by some prominent art authority brought to Sioux City by the Woman's Club for that purpose. This annual Iowa water-color show is the only traveling exhibition that originates in Iowa.

The American Association of University Women also has sponsored a tri-state (Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa) competition in oil painting. This year their Northwest Iowa Oil Show will be expanded to include the entire State. The Exhibition, scheduled for April 30-May 31, 1949, will be called the "Iowa May Show" and will be open to all Iowa artists. The first prize at this Exhibition will be \$100 and additional prizes will also be awarded by Eugene Kingman, Director of the Joslyn Memorial Art Museum of Omaha, Nebraska, who will judge the show.

Besides these two annual competitive shows, the Center's program includes a large schedule of traveling exhibitions on the average of two a month from September through May. These exhibits may be one-man shows, loans from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, or shows selected from prominent galleries. To accompany them the Center has a program of conducted tours, illustrated lectures, gallery talks, and demonstrations to establish a basis from which visitors can judge and appreciate works of art.



Thus the Sioux City Art Center, begun in 1938 as a WPA project, has grown to a community art center composed of 5 classrooms, 3 galleries, and an office, with a well-rounded program of classes, lectures, and exhibitions. In the words of its new Director, Carl F. Riter, "The high enthusiasm of Sioux Cityans already associated with the Art Center is a real indication of its potential values to the entire community."

JEAN B. KERN